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Washington Merry-go-round

By Jack Anderson & Les Whitten

WASHINGTON—The FBI has quietly entered the investigation of another presidential assassination — this one the 112-year-old shooting of Abraham Lincoln while he watched a performance at Ford's Theater in Washington.

In many respects, the 1865 murder of Lincoln remains even more controversial than the 1963 killing of President John F. Kennedy. Murky questions hang over both tragedies.

The belated FBI inquiry into Lincoln's death may help to resolve such mysteries as these: Was Lincoln the victim of a secret conspiracy reaching into his own cabinet? Was Frederick Douglass, the Martin Luther King, Jr., of the Lincoln era, also marked for murder? Did the assassin, John Wilkes Booth, actually escape and leave another man's body in his place?

New light on these questions is contained on some 18 pages that mysteriously disappeared from Booth's diary but may now have turned up. The diary reportedly was delivered intact to Lincoln's arrogant Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, who has been linked by rumors to the assassination plot.

When the diary was later introduced into the Andrew Johnson impeachment hearings, it was missing some pages that had been neatly excised. Now an indefatigable Americana expert, Joseph Lynch of Worthington, Mass., has found what appears to be the missing pages.

He made the discovery while appraising some historical artifacts belonging to Stanton's heirs. The pages were locked in a box in the attic. The heirs had never opened the box; in fact, they had no key.

The pages give a fascinating account, presumbly written by Booth, of his intrigues with Lincoln intimates shortly before the assassination. Some of the most prominent politicians of the period, including Stanton, are implicated.

Referring to a plot perhaps unrelated to the murder, Booth allegedly writes that he may be working for the Secretary of War himself. At another point, he declares: "I swear that I shall lay the body of this tyrant dead upon the altar of Mars." Apparently, Lincoln is the "tyrant," and "Mars," the god of war, could have been a code name for Stanton.

For years, the Booth diary, shorn of its mysterious pages, has been on display at Ford's Theater museum. But the Interior Department, which runs the museum, has now turned over the diary to the FBI. Its handwriting experts, with their ultraviolet scanners, microscopes and other detection devices, are trying to determine whether the diary itself is genuine.

They have made two important, tentative discoveries. The diary contains no writing in invisible ink, as some people have suspected for more than a century. The text also hasn't been altered, as others have thought. But the big question, whether the diary is entirely in Booth's handwriting, remains to be settled.

The FBI's findings may establish whether the 18 newly discovered pages are authentic. Lynch gained considerable credibility by insisting that the missing pages were lined. Most experts had thought the diary was unlined. But the museum's curator, Michael Harman, has now inspected the diary more scientifically and has confirmed that its pages, like those of Lynch's discovery, are dimly lined.

Along with the missing diary pages, Lynch also found hundreds of other intriguing items in the possession of the Stanton heirs. One is a letter to a newspaper, in which Booth reportedly outlined why he killed Lincoln.

A film company, Sunn Classic, has also been investigating the Lincoln assassination for a feature movie called "The Lincoln Conspiracy." One of its researchers, Lawrence Mooney of Alexandria, Va., has turned up some missing Booth letters and other data. Mooney believes he has evidence that Booth escaped and that another man's body was put in his place.

Another researcher, Prof. Ray Neff of Indiana State University, has also produced material which he believes shows Booth escaped at Garrett's farm where most experts believed he had been killed by pursuing troops.

Still another ingredient has been injected into the mystery by Lynch. He has discovered what looks like the name of Frederick Douglass, a black leader, in the Booth diary. This raises the possibility that Booth may have intended to kill Douglass, too.

Meanwhile, Curator Harman, a top government expert on the assassination, is taking an historian's cautious view about the renewed controversy. "It's the original can of worms," he said. "The government didn't conduct a thorough investigation at the time. I don't know whether we'll ever get all the answers."

WASHINGTON WHIRL—Senate investigators have complained privately that the Labor Department has been hindering their investigation of the scandal-plagued Teamster Central States Pension Fund. The Labor Department, they say, has balked on several requests for information.

—We recently dared to criticize the millitant Second Amendment Foundation, which has mounted a letter-writing campaign to suppress TV shows that are unsympathetic to the gun lobby. Two targets of their campaign are the TV hits "All in the Family" and "Hawaii Five-O." Now the foundation has launched a new letter-writing campaign to get newspapers to cancel our column.